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Rethinking borders in a mobile world: An alternative model

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Abstract

The purpose of this exploratory article is to conceptualize the new types of boundaries born of globalization. The first part of the article summarizes the unique territorial characteristics of States and the methods that they use to affect international flows through control over their own national borders. The second section elaborates the fundamentals of an alternative model that is not reliant, as is classical spatial analysis, on points, lines and surfaces to represent movement. The article then presents three types of limits: the confines, the threshold and the horizon, which result from the divergence, convergence or intersection of flows.

Keywords: space, mobility, borders, places, networks, globalization

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Introduction: Changing borders

The past decade has challenged the notion of a borderless world as it was imagined in the 1990s and has replaced it with an image of a gated world. In this gated world, the increase in trading exchanges upon which the idea of the borderless world was based has developed in parallel with a movement to securitize the most prosperous spaces (Brunet-Jailly 2007, van Houtum 2010). This evolution has led to important transformations in the forms and functions of borders, which must now guarantee security while also enabling migration and trade flows (Popescu 2012).

The tension between the development of transnational flows and the need for better national security has been temporarily addressed by selective strategies that invoke different security protocols depending on where and how people and goods cross national borders. This development gave rise to the concept of *networked borders*, which refers to the fact that borders are increasingly conceived as a network of interrelated controls (Rumford 2006a, b, Cooper and Rumford 2011). Far from having disappeared, contemporary borders have also shifted from the periphery of the nation-state to a multitude of locations, such as airports, detention centers, sea vessels, gated communities, and logistics centers or warehouses, giving the impression that they have become increasingly *diffused* (van Houtum 2010). Modern borders are no longer exclusively the lines that separate a mosaic of states. As the concept of *mobile borders* (Weber 2006, Jirón 2010, Amilhat-Szary and Giraut 2012, Gerard and Pickering 2014) indicates, contemporary borders can be projected at the periphery of some countries or large regional blocs. In Europe, for example, the management of southern and eastern borders is subcontracted to neighboring countries, which aspire to one day become members of the European Union (EU) or be more closely integrated to the European market within the framework of the EU Neighborhood Policy (van Houtum 2010, 2012).

Networked, diffused and mobile borders allow states to better control mobility – which is at the very source of their power – by monitoring flows from their origin to their final destinations and developing interrelated databases that keep a record of the nature of flows. The selective permeability that results from such borders is possible using sophisticated biometric technologies that can prevent illegal crossings and at the same time provide frequent travelers or goods following authorized transport corridors with rapid passage through border controls. The management of such transnational flows tends to blur the distinction between the interior and the

exterior of the state (Beck 2004). As the current debate on the data collected by the American National Security Agency and Transportation Security Administration demonstrates (Stellin 2013), analysis of the national security statistics divorced from its international implication no longer makes sense.

The purpose of this exploratory article is to conceptualize the new types of boundaries born of globalization. The article draws on our previous work on societies in the African Sahel where mobility and uncertainty are the foundational principles of spatial organization, a phenomenon with strong parallels to the globalized world (Retaillé 1995, 2005, Retaillé and Walther 2011). It emphasizes the need to develop new tools that take into account the fundamentally dynamic nature of contemporary cross-border flows. The first part of the article summarizes the unique territorial characteristics of States and the methods that they use to affect international flows through control over their own national borders. The second section elaborates the fundamentals of an alternative model that is not reliant, as is classical spatial analysis, on points, lines and surfaces to represent movement. In order to do so, we assume that the primordial principle of spatial organization is movement and consider the types of limits that emerge from a state in which movement is continuous. The article then presents three types of limits: the confines, the threshold and the horizon, which result from the divergence, convergence or intersection of flows.

State space and the control of movement

The power of the State is based on the fiction, identified by Rousseau (1792) in *The Social Contract*, of a perfect correspondence between collective identities and geographical boundaries. Territories and borders permit us to distinguish between communities and society: collective identity becomes community when contrasted with that outside of national territory, but within those boundaries constitutes a society. The fiction of the perfect alignment of society and territory explains why there are no States without territories or recognition of their sovereignty. Nation states, therefore, have two essential properties: exhaustiveness and exclusivity (Durand et al. 1992). Exhaustiveness implies that the social contract results in a sovereignty that unifies social and political organs. Exclusivity means that this sovereignty cannot be delegated to actors other than the State.

The dual property of exhaustiveness and exclusivity requires the establishment of a fixed definition of territory, ideally expressed through dominance over land and physically marked with borders. Over time, States have controlled movement and averted subversion ramparts, citadels, glacis walls and customs houses. From the walls of Jericho to the walls that are supposed to divide Israelis and Palestinians or the United States from Mexico (Dear 2013), the construction of walls illustrates the fiction of the harmonious accord between territory and identity and has allowed States to control movement and avert subversion.

In a globalized world in which the correspondence between the State and society is challenged, transnational activities have forced a reconsideration of the properties of exhaustiveness and exclusivity that have traditionally been associated with nation-states in the modern world. States still consider themselves as the only guarantor of power but this property is increasingly contested by transnational flows and entities such as supranational institutions, transnational networks, and global cities, which are able to control movement and master the distance between places, rather than occupy and organize territories (Taylor 2013). Similarly, States assert that their sovereignty cannot be delegated to other actors but, at the same time, they rely increasingly on a privatization of border control. Their power over border regions has increasingly been challenged by local actors and institutions that take advantage of the border differentials to develop business, and challenge the link between regions, states and identity (Paasi 2002, 2013).

After the Second World War, Gottmann (1952, 1982) was undoubtedly the first geographer to recognize the limits of the nation state model and to conceptualize the tension between the partitioning of space and movement. Gottmann (1952: 219) noted that there had always been "a certain hostility, a natural opposition" between the circulation of people and their goods and political organization. His analysis of the relationship between the political systems of modern States and territory demonstrated the fundamental importance of movement, what he called "circulation in space", and showed that movement was the driving principle of the spatial organization of human societies. Despite the apparent durability of human settlements, which Gottmann significantly called "crossroads", movement continued to be a force of change in the organization of space and a factor that distinguished places. The partitioning of space using political borders was ultimately an effort to master this movement.

Points, lines and surfaces

It took several decades for Gottmann's ideas to be adopted (Johnston 1996) and widely used in the debates on the territoriality of the State that permeated at the end of the 1980s (Agnew 1994, Taylor 1994). Until then, the idea that movement was at the origin of the construction of space was foreign to many branches of geography, in particular spatial analysis, the successor of the regional geography approaches of the 1960s. Spatial analysis certainly recognized the importance of flows of people and nature (Haggett 1965), but these flows were regarded as either a change of location or as a change of state. For example, in spatial analysis, an emigrant became an immigrant or an export became an import, instead of understanding the dynamics of movement itself. In any case, locations were fixed and only the hierarchies, limits or extents of the units of analysis could change. This view was progressively consolidated in cartographic representations based on three structural elements: points, lines and surfaces (Getis and Boots 1978). Points permitted the representation of fixed geographical places, like towns, villages, airports, mines or tourist attractions. These points described places that, in spatial analysis, were the origins of movement. They were, in turn, the origin of lines, which described links between places, such as roads, flight paths, commuting patterns or migration. Finally, surfaces depicted territories, such as regions or States.

In classical spatial analysis, each of these structural elements related to a particular geographical feature: points showed where places were located, lines evoked paths of movement between places, and surfaces showed the extension of territories. Combining the three structural elements with the geographical features that they represented, spatial analysis identified three fundamental processes: (1) the polarization of space that was the result of the concentration of people and things in a particular location; (2) the organization of space that stemmed from the distribution of movement between places; and (3) the delimitation of space, which was associated with the production of territorial limits (Retaillé and Walther 2011).

Over the past couple of decades, the initial focus of the field of spatial analysis on formulating general principles of spatial organization has been challenged by the emergence of new approaches. However, the structural concepts developed in the 1960s have remained extremely powerful in our contemporary representations of space. Even though spaces of flows (Castells 1996) have become a critical, though not dominant, structural dimension in geography,

the representation of these flows is still often based on a "sedentary" conception of space influenced by the point-line-surface trio in which territories are graphically more prominent than networks (Retaillé 2013).

Building on Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) notion of "rhythm", van Houtum (2012) notes for example that migratory flows are generally indicated by static and unidirectional arrows superimposed on the framework of States. This obscures many important dimensions of these flows, including the internal movement of migrants: "*the underlying assumption that migration is a one-off linear movement leading to a final destination, which is often illustrated by the use of straight arrows, lines and dots, is seriously flawed*" (van Houtum 2012: 410). Maps produced to better comprehend transnational terrorism provide another example of the persistence of a territorial approach to movement. Although many analysts recognize the importance of the social networks that support terrorist activities and their high levels of cross-border mobility (Sageman 2008, Medina and Harper 2013), maps frequently reduce terrorism to a group of "sanctuary" territories (see, for example, Dowd and Raleigh 2013).

Cartographic conventions inherited from spatial analysis appear to be less and less effective in representing the transnational phenomenon that are at the heart of globalization, yet they are stubbornly persistent in the literature. In the following section we argue that new tools are necessary in order to more effectively understand transnational phenomena and to adapt cartographic techniques in order to avoid a future where "border concepts are outpaced by the acceleration of world events" (Wilson and Donnen 2012: 15).

New types of limits

If points, lines and surfaces are probably inadequate to the task of representing movement as anything other than a displacement, what more appropriate alternatives exist? Current literature has not yet achieved a consensus on this question. Some authors have argued for a non-representational theory of space-time (Thrift 1996, Merriman 2012). Others have rejected graphic elements in favor of metaphors that capture new practices linked to mobility, arguing that spatial forms are social properties that only emerge through human behaviors (Urry 2000). Yet others have developed a geovisualization of spatio-temporalities that can be represented using geographical information systems (Miller and Bridwell 2009, Schwanen and Kwan 2012).

In what follows, we outline an alternative model in which movement, and not places or territories, is the driving force of the production of space. Our main focus is no longer a localized stock (of migrants or of foreign investment) characterized by their x and y coordinates, but the flow itself that we try to understand through its intensity and its interactions with other flows. These principles can be applied to any type of movement regardless of their political, economic, social or cultural characteristics. We elaborate this approach through a series of examples from the Sahel, whose unique spatial characteristics inspired its development (Retaillé 1995). Sahelian societies have developed numerous strategies to cope with the climatic and political uncertainties that characterize their environment. Despite the subsequent creation of modern States and borders in the region, these strategies rely on a high degree of mobility across all strata of society, whether related to agricultural settlements, migrants, armed rebellions, tourism or cross-border trade (de Bruijn et al. 2001, de Bruijn 2007, Grätz 2010). We draw, in particular, on the recent Malian conflict, in which a temporary coalition of secessionist rebels and Islamist groups opposed the Malian government and the French army from 2012 to 2013 (see Lecoq et al. 2013, Retaillé and Walther 2014).

We apply a framework similar to that employed by van Houtum (2012: 412), which identifies two fundamental elements in the representation of borders: their form and their temporality. Instead of identifying the structural elements that explain the structure of geographic space, such as points, lines and surfaces, and then trying to take into account how these elements can take new forms when flows intensify, we start by considering the main forms resulting from a state of permanent movement. These forms are divergence, convergence, and intersectional movements, respectively. Movement can lead to a *divergence* when it flows in any direction, to a *convergence* when directed to what will become a center, or to generalized *intersection* when it occurs in no centrifugal or centripetal direction.

A group of farmers in search of new territory for cultivation in response to demographic pressures is an example of a divergent movement, as is the case in the region of the Black Volta in West Africa. There, the first arrivals on the new frontier appropriated the titles of traditional land holders that subsequently empowered them to exercise political and religious dominance over more recent arrivals (Lentz 2013). In contrast, the alliance of armed groups attacking a strategic urban center, such as the combined offensive of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in Mali in 2012,

is an example of convergent movements. The assembly of merchants within a market or of migrants stopping in a Saharan city on their way to North Africa (Brachet 2012) are examples of intersectional movements. More or less fixed locations anchor these crossings: border markets that take advantage of differences in national regulatory regimes; Saharan oases linked to trade and migration routes; shanties for migrants on the boundary of the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla; or refugee camps created by Western countries.

Each of these three types of movements produces a particular type of limit. Divergent movements that proceed without encountering resistance result in the creation of confines or frontiers. These frontiers are created in regions open to agriculture, military or mineral exploration and where only the inner edge is clearly defined. An indefinite space of opportunity, or threat, exists beyond this boundary. In Mali, for example, the Saharan region has historically functioned as a frontier territory within which territorial administration was delegated by the central government to local tribes. This context of State retreat initially led to the development of illegal trafficking in the region, then to the establishment of political and marital ties between Islamists groups diversely affiliated with AQIM, Tuareg and Arab tribes (Walther and Christopoulos 2014).

Convergent movements create thresholds, which we generally refer to as borders. In contrast to frontiers, these thresholds are limited from two sides, the interior and the exterior. These form where two convergent flows meet. African history provides numerous examples of modern borders created from the convergence of colonial powers, such as between Niger and Nigeria at the end of the 19th century for example (Miles 1994). Several recent conflicts have emerged in Sahelo-Saharan Africa as a result of an asymmetry in the powers that had traditionally secured these modern borders. This is now the case in Mali where a secessionist movement was able to form in the interstitial space – known as Azawad – between Algeria in the North and the weakening central power of Mali in the south. The types of boundaries on the two margins of Azawad differ sharply: the Algerian border is strongly protected by a military presence (forming a threshold) while the Malian territory is only marginally controlled by the central government (forming a confines).

Finally, the limit formed by the intersection of global flows can be characterized as a horizon. This is a limit that has no internal or external boundary. Mobility is at the heart of the definition of a horizon: in a world where movement is perpetual, the horizon is unattainable to

the extent that it moves as we progress forward. An individual connected to the Internet, with access to constant information flows, is an example of this type of boundary. Another example is provided by the space resulting from globalized financial flows, in which decisions made in New York City, London or Shanghai can have immediate consequences anywhere in the world. The horizon is also the limit of human diasporas, these "*socially interdependent, but spatially dispersed, communities*" (Cohen 1971: 267), which rely on a network of non-hierarchical places, through which migrants can constantly move and feel fully at home.

Conclusion

Modern borders are no longer the external limits of territorial sovereignty delimited by fixed lines but are control networks that extend into States as on the peripheries of large regional blocs. In this gated world, it is not enough for States or supranational institutions to manage the population and goods within their control, but to understand their movement over the course of their voyages. An understanding of the geography of displacement based on origins and destinations is gradually giving way to a geography of movement that takes into account the nature of the flows themselves. Gottmann (1952) predicted this evolution. As early as the 1950s, he demonstrated that movement was itself a driver of change in society, in contradiction to the canon of spatial analysis based on the foundation of lines, points and surfaces. Over the past several decades, the conceptual influence of spatial analysis has declined significantly, but the graphical conventions that propagated from its "sedentary" perspective of space have remained surprisingly durable.

The main contribution of this article is the argument that adopting a model of mobile space allows us to overcome some of the limits embedded in spatial analysis approaches. We proposed three different types of movements – divergent, convergent and intersectional – and demonstrated how each of the movements could result in the creation of different types of limits that we have designated confines (or frontiers), thresholds (or borders) and horizons, respectively.

Adopting this model enables us to develop two theoretical perspectives. First, the model rests on the principle that movement comes first and ends at a place, rather than adopting the classical spatial analysis approach of beginning with a place and then discovering movement.

The places at the intersections of flows develop or decline as a function of the intensity of movements. When those flows are constant, such as those that underpin the creative industries of Silicon Valley, the tourism industry in Saint Tropez, or the pilgrimage to Mecca, places have a tendency to become permanent and to be confused with their sites, which are the physical manifestations of the places. If the direction of flow changes, places can gradually disappear, as was the case with certain Saharan cities that lost their importance when trade routes reoriented themselves at the beginning of the twentieth century, or abruptly appear on the international scene, as was the case of the city of Fukushima following the nuclear catastrophe in 2011 in Japan.

In the mobile space approach as in previous work (Thrift 1999, Massey 2005), the production of places is dependent on flows, thereby turning the view that flows are linked to places defined *a priori* on its head. In this approach, trajectories and phases of movement replace the endpoints of origin and destination through which spatial analysis traditionally studied movement and on which most of the cartographic representations of flows are still based. As we have argued elsewhere, the value of a place in the globalized world is less related to its intrinsic qualities (the *genius loci*) than to its ability to function sustainably as an intersection of different types of flows (Retaillé 2012).

The second theoretical perspective that emerges from this model is that the nature of borders is multidimensional. Borders can vary not only relative to the direction of flows, but also depending on their nature. In his effort to overcome the tension between securisation and openness, Rumford (2006b) observed that borders can become differentiated depending on the types of actors or merchandise that cross them: a border that is secured against migration can also be an object of interest to tourists or artists that are permitted to cross. Our research arrives at a similar conclusion. This multidimensional character is particular evident in the Sahel, where the model of mobile space was initially developed, to the extent that national borders are regularly subverted by traveling merchants, migrants, rebels and religious extremists.

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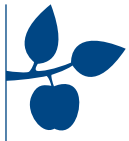

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